

What is Public Art?

Defining public art as an artwork temporarily or permanently placed in a public space is too simplistic. Public art is not just one thing. It can be a variety of artistic forms. It can be placed inside or outside; be representational or abstract. It can be integrated with architecture, landscape or infrastructure. It can be functional, commemorative, decorative, or interactive. It can employ technology, text, or sound.

Both the form and role of public art varies from community to community. Public art can contribute to the visual and textural character of a community, create a sense of place or foster a sense of spirit by celebrating history or cultural heritage. Public art seeks to inspire relationships and communication. Perhaps the following haiku penned by Seattle architect/public artist Mark Spitzer defines the nebulousness of public art nicely.

*Artist involvement –
Time, energy and money
With community*

The Nature of Contemporary Public Art

There has been a trend away from more traditional studio forms placed in a public space to an approach that is more site-determined, collaborative, integrated, and community driven.

Municipal capital improvement % for art programs fund public art in order to impact design elements of public buildings, infrastructure and amenities.

Funders want an art that is respectful of, meaningful for, and connected to the community.

The Responsibilities of a Public Artist: How Does a Public Artist Work?

The role of the *public* artist is distinct from the artist who creates work that is not refined through an established public process, which articulates the goals for the work and includes opportunities for external direction. This work of art will therefore be **relevant and responsive** to the site, the community it will serve, and be shaped by your dialogue with project representatives. Your idea for the artwork must be shared with others because public art is fundamentally a collaborative process.

To learn about the goals for the particular artistic response you will be asked to create, requires that you **communicate** well. This communication is a two-way street: your client must be able to articulate what they are trying to achieve (ironically, something that they are actually hiring you to do for them!) and you must be able to ask questions and be integral to a comprehensive yet unlimited conversation about all aspects of the project (site conditions, population served, what the artwork is expected to achieve, materials of fabrication-construction). These communications will be both verbal and written.

There are many challenges to being a public artist. One of the conditions is to **open your artistic process** for access by others: the commissioning agency, peer professionals, design review and advisory committees, the general public, elected officials, the design and construction team. Each public art project that a community undertakes is born full of promise and with excitement. As you know, every design process is also full of surprises. There will be